

A critical analysis of egeus, hippolyta and shylock in filmic shakespeare

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



In 'The Motives of Eloquence', Lantham describes Shakespearean drama as the art of "superposition". One arc of action is performed over others so that "[d]ramatic motive is stronger than 'real', serious motive". The justification of a character's action occurs as theatre. "Drama, ceremony, is always needed to authenticate the experience". In a morally ambiguous play text, the characters dramatise their motives to justify their actions. While Lantham argues that this dramatisation occurs at the level of the playtext, it is my intent to argue that there is an analogous mechanism operating at the level of the play itself. Shakespearean comedy in particular seems to offer a preferred mode of justice, what I will refer to as comedic justice. Comedic justice is the sense that the play will arrive at a 'justified' ending - that 'true love' will prevail and villainous characters will be punished for their actions. This comic justice acts to bring the play towards its obligatory, happy conclusion. In this sense, superposition occurs when other characters offer subjective justices: systems of justice that come from the needs of a character rather than a dramatic requirement. Although these subjective justices never triumph in a comedy, they are rarely the target of moralisation. These alternative justices make themselves apparent in production through their flexibility; simple directorial decisions can accentuate these justices, remove them or radically reposition their dominance. In both Max Reinhardt's and Michael Hoffman's adaptation of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', the character of Egeus is conspicuously underplayed. While there is the potential for subversive justice, both directors cast him as an inconsequential villain; he is little more than a plot mechanism. Reinhardt's 'A Midsummer Nights Dream' presents the

audience with a rebellious Hippolyta. She presents a powerfully constructed alternative justice. This alternative is never dominant and eventually becomes absorbed into the film's comedic discourse. However, the film can make some claim to preserving the 'superposition' present in the play. This contrasts with Michael Hoffman's adaptation of the same play. In his film, Hippolyta's justice is reconstructed to act as a function of comedic justice. Of all the films discussed in this paper, the most radical adaptation occurs in Michael Radford's *Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice'*. Like Egeus, it is possible to characterise Shylock as a discardable comedic villain, devoid of justification. It is equally possible to imagine Shylock as a variation on Hippolyta, a minority justice peripheral to the play. However, Radford chooses to undermine the comedic drive of the play and accentuate Shylock's tragic potential. There is a comedic justice to the film but its execution can only be achieved at Shylock's expense. Ultimately, the happy ending demanded by the form is undermined by Shylock's suffering. A figure from classical mythology, Shakespeare's Hippolyta comes prefigured with history and character. Her relationship with Theseus in the play is always glossed by reference to her capture and forced marriage. Theseus admits in the first scene, "I woo'd thee with the sword, and won thy love doing thee injuries". Reinhardt's representation of her character accentuates this tension. In contrast to Theseus' jollity, Hippolyta appears disdainful, even vengeful. Teasdale's costuming establishes Hippolyta as an emblem of violent, Amazonian power. The snake draped around her shoulders recalls Eve the temptress and her headdress causes her to appear serpentine, herself. In a further nod to classical mythology, Hippolyta keeps her right

breast covered throughout the first scene. This serves to remind the audience of the ' history' behind Hippolyta's character and explain her discontent. From the opening of Reinhardt's film, we see a tragic figure out of place in a comedic setting. Reinhardt's representation of Hippolyta is aligned against the tone of the opening scene and the play in general. Implicitly, she draws attention to her suffering and the injustice perpetrated against her. Teasdale's delivery of the lines " Four days will quickly steep themselves in night..." makes clear that Hippolyta wants nothing to do with Theseus. Here, Reinhardt rearranges the playtext so that these lines come after the introduction of the lovers rather than before. This further highlights Hippolyta's incongruity with the levity of the other characters. Reinhardt's Theseus may feel justified but he is clearly operating by a system of justice to which Hippolyta does not subscribe. Her characterisation in the opening scene is a representation of dissatisfaction with the dominant justice of the play. While her posited justice remains unrecognised, Reinhardt never gives the audience any moral grounds to deny Hippolyta. Her justice is subservient to the culture of the film but remains a valid alternative, nevertheless. Hoffman's filmic adaptation of the same play treats Hippolyta's mythological history quite differently. The change in setting from classical Athens to Monte Athena in the 1800s significantly softens her character; Reinhardt's Hippolyta is angry and powerful while Hoffman's is more innocent and playful. When Marceau delivers Hippolyta's opening lines, there is no hint of the disdain that Teasdale's performance shows for Theseus. This Hippolyta is clearly attracted to Theseus - even her rebuff of his sexual advance is flirtatious. In general, she seems more congruous with the comedic tone of

the play. However, it is made apparent that Hoffman's Hippolyta is also at odds with Athenian legality. Hippolyta's reaction to Egeus' plea is silent but clearly sympathetic to the plight of Lysander and Hermia. Later, she shows her disapproval of Theseus' ruling when she dismisses his boasting about "the music of [his] hounds". Interestingly, despite the change in setting, Hoffman retains Theseus' references to Hippolyta's classical prefiguration. As a result, the relationship between the two is more equivocal, if happier than Reinhardt's interpretation. Perhaps Hoffman is suggesting an arranged marriage between Theseus and Hippolyta, not unlike that between Demetrius and Hermia. If this is the case, her defence of Hermia can be read as a projection of her own desires. Regardless, it is clear that Marceau's Hippolyta is, like Teasdale's at odds with the dominant justice of the play; both posit a version of justice superimposed on the justice of Athenian law. Despite this, both characters have different roles in their respective films. The justice of Hoffman's Hippolyta is always working towards and contributing to the play's happy ending. Reinhardt's interpretation of the character acts against the comedy. Her justice is alternative, rather than true or false. The former's concept of justice is aligned with the true justice of the play - the justice that works towards the comedic ending. In contrast, the character of Egeus in the same play is very much aligned with the prevailing system of law. As a father, "the ancient privilege of Athens" to arrange Hermia's marriage is his. His representation in both films is rather straightforward. He is an elderly man, whose motivation for patronising Demetrius seems rather weak. Lysander remains uncontradicted when he describes himself as being "...as well deriv'd as [Demetrius],/As well

possess'd...". Critics have suggested that Egeus' preference for Demetrius may be motivated by homoerotic desire. Lysander mockingly suggests to Demetrius: " You have her father's love, Demetrius: Let me have Hermia's; do you marry him." However, neither Hoffman nor Reinhardt makes any clear reference to this reading in their films. He is reduced to a disapproving father acting as plot mechanism, in the vein of Capulet, Brabantio and Polonius. Is it then possible to describe his motivations as justified, as he is represented in the films? In my opinion, he is but only in part. In this role, Egeus draws attention to the distinction between legalistic justice and moral or ' true' justice. He is certainly opposed to the system of ' true' justice that draws the play to its conclusion. However, unlike Reinhardt's Hippolyta, Egeus claims a justice that is not alternative but simply false. There is potential for a similar reading of Shylock in ' The Merchant of Venice'. Whether the character is played " as a repulsive clown or ... as a monster of unrelieved evil", he extols false justice. Palmer suggests that even at his most desperate, there is always potential for grotesque comedy in Shylock's lines. The concept of legality as an obstacle to justice is recurrent theme in the play. Portia's chests prevent her from marrying as she chooses and Antonio's bond threatens to undo a happy, comedic ending. Legalism in the play is always overcome through conceit, justified only by the play's comedic tone. Portia provides a hint to Bassanio through rhyme in the music and settles Antonio's bond through a questionable loophole. In these interpretations of the play, Shylock is comparable to Egeus: erroneous and vindictive rather than justified. There is always the possibility, however, of a sympathetic reading of Shylock. It is hard to imagine an interpretation of his

“Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech that fails to evoke some degree of sympathy. Radford’s filmic adaptation of the play adopts a variation on this interpretation. In this film, Shylock’s potential as a comedic villain is ignored and he is repositioned as a tragic figure. The film begins with a montage that demonstrates the cruelty of the Christian population towards the Jewish inhabitants of the city. Palmer notes that all characters in ‘The Merchant of Venice’ exhibit questionable moral judgement. Bassanio and Antonio appear to exist in an unhealthy state of co-dependency. Portia’s harsh treatment of Shylock contradicts her earlier references to the benefits of mercy. Radford chooses to emphasise these elements of the play and complicate the vicarious happiness of the main characters, therefore. In this film, Shylock’s justice is not a false justice like that of Egeus. Neither is it an alternative justice competing for validity as with Reinhardt’s Hippolyta. In Radford’s film, it is Shylock’s justice that can make the best claim to validity, despite being uncomedic. In the films discussed above, the directors explore characters’ conflicting notions of justice and resolve this conflict in different ways. Reinhardt’s Hippolyta is an example of a character whose subversive justice repressed and realigned with the justice of the play. Teasdale’s presentation of the character bears little resemblance to the dark Amazon of the film’s opening scene. She appears content with her situation and no longer appears uncomfortable at Theseus’ side. Her change of heart is further represented by her change in costuming. Whereas her initial dress emphasised her violent ‘otherness’, her billowing wedding dress makes her appear more congruous with the other characters. With both breasts apparently intact, she openly engages with the other characters in their

mockery of the workers' play. By the end of the film Hippolyta and Theseus become just one of "all the couples three". Little is made of this Hippolyta's drastic change in behaviour. If it runs contrary to principles of psychological realism, we can accept it because it is dramatically correct. This is not to say that a radical interpretation of Hippolyta as a tragic figure is impossible. Reinhardt simply chooses to do something different; the comedic nature of the film requires Hippolyta to submit and so she does. However, her character has already allowed for the possibility of an alternative justice, neither false nor dominant. This Hippolyta conforms but may still say like Laertes, "I can rant as well as thou". In a reversal of roles, Hoffman requires not Hippolyta to submit but Theseus. The conflict between Hippolyta and Theseus is reduced to a foil for the lovers' plight. In this film, it is suggested that Theseus subverts legal custom as a concession to Hippolyta. Whatever tension that exists between the two evaporates and the comedic demands of the narrative are fulfilled. Both Hoffman and Reinhardt end the film with three analogous relationships. Despite sharing a similar outcome, the different representations of Hippolyta create two entirely different processes. Hoffman's Hippolyta subverts legality rather than conforms to it and acts as a champion of the film's 'true' justice. The film therefore creates a homogenised single system of justice that denies the possibility of Reinhardt's alternatives. T. S. Eliot states that unity in Shakespeare can be found in its lack thereof: "Unity in Shakespeare but not universality". For its own purposes, this film creates universality of justice where it is lacking in the play text. Egeus can be similarly problematic for a director who (like Reinhardt or Hoffman) seeks to end the play light-heartedly. Reinhardt

seems to completely ignore Egeus in the second half of the play. Having fulfilled his function by instigating the action of the play, he disappears quietly. For Reinhardt, Egeus is more a plot mechanism than a character with any claim to psychology. Hoffman deviates from this formula only slightly. This Egeus has a character but only as a trope. He is dismissed by Theseus as the latter pardons Hermia and Lysander ; later, he expresses his disapproval by forsaking the wedding festivities. His later characterisation in Hoffman's film only works to increase his resemblance to the father-figure archetype discussed above; he is subsequently discarded as a comic villain. However, an accentuation of the homoerotic reading discussed earlier would create an entirely different character and ending. This Egeus would be more closely comparable to Reinhardt's Hippolyta: an ' other' excluded from the comedic discourse of the film - in a word, ' tragic'. It is this type of character that we see in Radford's ' Merchant of Venice'. While Reinhardt's Hippolyta always threatens to undo the comedy of the film, Radford's Shylock actually achieves it. While his justice acts in opposition to the comedy of the film it also establishes a secondary, tragic reading. The final scene brings Shylock's tragic arc to its climax and conclusion. Lynn Collin's portrayal of Portia-as-Balthazar is confident and comfortable. She extols the benefits of mercy, " above the sceptred sway" and begs him to " tear up the bond". However, Collin's Portia never seems to display any hope that Shylock will accept her terms. She knows what the outcome of the trial will be and takes a position of moral superiority. The film consistently establishes binary oppositions of opulence and comfort against decay and squalor - the ghetto of Venice against the comfort of Belmont. Never is this binary more apparent than the

dialogue between Portia and Shylock in the final scene. Both characters are eloquent and present powerful arguments in their favour. In all other senses, however, their speech is quite different. Portia's explanation of "the quality of mercy" is lofty and poetic – the repetition of the 's' and 'th' sound pleasing and placative. In contrast, Shylock is deliberately offensive, referencing rats, pigs, urine and other distasteful subjects in his argument. Having been forced to forfeit his bond, Shylock is divested of his wealth and forced to convert to Christianity. As Shylock exits the court, there is a final shot in which members of the Jewish community remove his yarmulke and spit on him. The film's ending removes Shylock from his own culture and raises doubts about the possibility or desirability of entering another. In one of the final shots of the film, the audience is shown a close-up of Jessica's turquoise ring. Misinformed, Shylock's tragic revenge becomes all the more pathetic. His disgrace is echoed even in the insulated paradise of Belmont. The justice of the comedy becomes secondary to the justice of the film. That is, the film's character of Shylocks acts to infect and ambiguate the happiness of the ending. Together, the various adaptations of Egeus, Hippolyta and Shylock emphasise the fluidity of justice in Shakespearean comedy. Taken from a text that is entirely ambiguous regarding the nature of justice, directorial adaptation can realign, reposition and even ignore the justices of the text. Both versions of Egeus ignore his own justice and characterise him as a comic villain; his potential as a justified minor character is removed. The two different versions of Hippolyta indicate the interpretative power of the director seeking justification for a character. Hoffman's Hippolyta is simply an extension of the dominant comedic justice.

In contrast, Reinhardt's *Hippolyta* retains her implicit claim to justice from Theseus. This *Hippolyta* retains the superpositioned justice of the playtext without explicit moralisation. Radford, on the other hand, chooses to position the dominant justice of the film against the justice of the comedy. Through his characterisation of Shylock, he emphasises the tragedy of the comedy and demonstrates the fluid justice of Shakespearean comedy.

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